



# MINDING THE MINDS DURING THE PANDEMIC: A STUDY ON INDIA INC.

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## ABSTRACT

In India mental health issues lurk in the dark, primarily because of the stigma associated with the word 'mental'. Of late, mainly because of the pandemic, the topic has again come to the fore. The article lays special emphasis on mental health issues in the Indian Corporate sector. Considering the fact that with the global lockdowns, it is important for people to maintain their sanity and move forward and in order to achieve this, the first and foremost thing is to maintain a stable mental health. The article sheds light on the status of mental health issues in India specially during the current pandemic and how the corporate in the country have been dealing with this lurking issue.

**KEYWORDS:** Mental Health, Corporate, Stigma, Pandemic, Lockdown

## INTRODUCTION

In time of the global pandemic, a grey area of mental health has come to the fore, rapidly because of the sudden demise of many popular faces. The area of mental health has been sensationalized and highlighted since then. Not only in the glamour world but in various other occupations and even students have fallen victims to the hushed tones with which we speak about mental health. The article focuses on the area of mental health in the business world. Mental health issues in the Indian corporate sector is not restricted only to the employees but even Top managers are falling prey to it. In the year 2019, the death of a top coffee baron again brought into fore the debate on mental health. Even though the country has progressed rapidly, the hushed tone we use while visiting a psychiatrist speaks volumes about how this issue is still considered a taboo.

During this global pandemic, though business leaders over the world are tensed over the changing graphs of their profit and loss statements, another problem that is looming is the issue of mental health, amidst the quarantines imposed all over. Where a simple walk over to a next door shop to buy essentials feels like walking into a trap. Social isolation, bleak information about the virus, fear of contracting it, global recession and a feeling of hopelessness is leading to the rise of stress and anxiety levels among the masses. As per a global survey undertaken by Qualtrics and SAP during March and April 2020 across 2700 employees of 10 industries 75 percent reported that they felt socially isolated, 67 percent reported higher stress, 57 percent reported greater anxiety levels and 53 percent were reported to be emotionally exhausted. The more our society is getting involved in a rat race and a tryst for money, fame and recognition, the more we are inching towards a state of depression.

In another survey by the Indian Psychiatric Society, it was revealed that there is a 20 percent rise in mental health cases and those having a history of anxiety or depression tend to suffer more. Mental health has become a more integral part of human life and is a key to living a healthy and balanced life. It is even more important than physical health as it is said that 'A healthy mind leads to a healthy body'. It has an impact on how people feel and behave each day. It also has an impact on decision making capacity of an individual or how he or she copes with day to day activities or deals with stress. When a person is emotionally healthy he or she tends to be more productive.

Though most of the big corporations have made remote working protocols and the concept of virtual workplace was a work in progress but the abrupt shift to 100 percent remote working was something for which not everyone was prepared for. Though some adapted with it quite well, few struggled as well because of the lack of belongingness as a team. Organizations tried to pay full salaries to the workers and the top management took pay cuts so that the company could stay afloat but after sometime few of them had no option but to resort to lay offs. The fear of losing job amidst the pandemic is one of the key reasons of anxiety among people.

The concept of work from home which was previously considered as a perk has now become a double edge sword. The conversion of homes into partial workplaces where people need to juggle between kids, homework and video calls has led to more anxiety and burn-out as people do not get a chance to turn off. Though people often talk about the difficulties of this section the ones who get ignored are the single people living alone who along with everything also have to deal with isolation. There have been a significant rise in cases of

obsessive compulsive disorder and rise in suicidal tendencies as well.

From time immemorial there is always a stigma associated with mental health. People feel a sense of embarrassment while talking about mental health because of the fear of being judged or retaliated. An important task lies ahead of the CEO's and managers to rise in the light of the situation and transform the tide. Talking about mental health is not only the right way but also a smart way of doing business. By encouraging an open dialogue on mental health it will lead to a healthy work environment. When employees feel a sense of being heard it will result in greater productivity for a business.

## Theories Related To Organizational Stress

Though there is a large rise in the number of cases relating to mental health during the pandemic but one cannot deny the fact that there were prevailing cases relating to mental health even during the pre-pandemic era. Though in a relatively lesser number. Thus, in order to find a solution to the problems of stress and depression in an organization, one should have a clear understanding of the theories relating to stress in an organization:

### Transactional Theories of Stress

The most commonly used transactional theory suggests that stress is the direct result of a transaction between individuals and their environment which may tax their resources and cause a threat to their wellbeing (Lazarus 1986, Lazarus and Folkman 1987). Here, any aspect related to the work environment can be perceived as a stressor by the appraising individual. Yet an individual's appraisal of capabilities can be affected by a number of factors like personality, situational demands, coping skills, time lapse or any stress state already experienced before (Prem et al. 2017). Another transactional review provides a broad consensus that stressors exert their effects only through how an individual evaluates and perceives them (Ganster and Rosen 2013). In order to recognise the external and internal elements of workplace stress, (Cox, 1993) introduced another modified transactional theory. This theory gave a peek into the sources from which stressors occur, an individual's perceptions of those stressors and his/her ability to cope, the psychological and physiological changes, perceived ability to cope and the consequences of coping with stress and the general feedback during this process.

### Interactional Theories of Stress

Interactional theories of stress emphasize on the interaction between environmental stimulus and the individual responses as a foundation of stress (Lazarus and Launier, 1978). For instance, the Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) theory views that effort at work place is a part of the psychological contract, based on the norms of reciprocity of the society, where effort is remunerated with rewards and opportunities (Siegrist, 1996).

The Person-Environment Fit theory which is one of the earliest interactional theories of work-related psychological distress, it suggest that work-related stress arise due to a lack of interaction between individual's skills, resources and demands of work environment (Caplan 1987, French, Caplan and Van Harrison 1982). It maybe argued that stress can occur when there is a lack of fit between the degree to which an employee's attitudes and abilities can meet the demands of the job or the extent to which the job environment can meet the needs of the workers. (French, Rodgers and Cobb 1974).

The Job Demand-Control (JDC) theory supposes that work-related stress maybe a result of interaction between several psychological job demands, interpersonal conflict, decision of authorities and skill discretion (breadth of work-related skills used) (Karasek Jr 1979). However, the original concept of this theory was expanded in 1988 and it became the Demand Control Support (DCS) theory, which described how social support may also act as a buffer in high demand situations (Johnson and Hall 1988). As social support can act as a coping mechanism which in turn can moderate the negative impacts of job stress.

#### Allostatic Load Model

This theory provides a multidisciplinary review of Work Stress and Employee Health and also identifies the intervening physiological processes which links exposures to stress with health outcomes (Ganster and Rosen 2013). Allostasis is the adjustment of an individual's bodily systems that helps in coping with real, illusory, or anticipated challenges with homeostatic (stable) bodily systems. This model proposes that continued overstimulation leads to poor tertiary health outcomes. It is concerned with the psychological rather than the physical outcomes of work-related stress.

#### The Conservation of Resources (COR) Model

The above illustrated models outline potential hazards relating to workplace. Yet, work-related stressors cannot always be separated from general life stressors. Thus, the Conservation of Resources (COR) Model, an integrated model of stress looks to encompass several stress theories relating to work, life and family (Hobfoll 1989). According to this model, stress occurs when there is a probable loss or threat to loss of resources. This occurs because individuals try to maintain their resources, which maybe in the form of objects, conditions and other things that individuals value. These stressors maybe in the form of resources like one's home, clothing, relationships, one's self esteem, time or finances. If we consider in this context, work and relationship conflicts may result in stress because resources such as time and energy are lost in the process of managing both roles effectively (Hobfoll 2001). This may in turn result in job dissatisfaction and anxiety, although other resources such as self-esteem may moderate such conflicts and stress. Such a model would be useful in the development of resource-focused interventions which aim to make changes in employees' resources and subsequent outcomes (Halbesleben et al. 2014).

#### Issue of Mental Health In India Inc : The Pre and Post Pandemic Scenario

Though the issue of mental health is known to be haunting India Inc prior to the occurrence of the current pandemic, the elephant in the room was addressed on account of the current pandemic. A scenario of both the scenes are depicted as under:

##### The Pre-Pandemic Scenario

On account of the World Mental Health Day in the year 2018, it was reported in a study of Assocham that 42.5 percent employees working in India's private sector suffer from anxiety, burn out and depression. The issue raises mostly because of low wages and longer working hours which results in fatigue among the workers. In a report published in the year 2019, by the World Health Organisation, India was positioned as the most depressed country in the world. It was stated that 6.5 percent of the total population of the country had some mental condition. The average working hours of the employees of the country were also the longest i.e. 48 hours per week which is higher than the prescribed limit of the International Labour organization. The resultant impact is the burnout both mentally and physically. A private sector employee in India works for a minimum of 48-50 hours a week while in the UK, the same employee works for 33 hours in the same job and 40 hours in the US. The pay is also a big differentiator, the US personnel gets six times more than the Indian personnel. Though the numbers are huge, the subject of mental health is often discussed in hushed tones in the business circles in India.

##### The Post Covid Scenario

As already mentioned in the previous paragraph, prior to the Covid -19 pandemic, the issue of mental health was discussed in hushed tones in the companies. Nor did organizations take pain to balance the mental well being of the employees but the pandemic has rung the bell and forced employers to address the elephant in the room. According to a survey by Deloitte, from the very beginning of the pandemic the organizations are focusing on the issue of mental health. Keeping the sanity of the workforce during the pandemic is the top most priority of the business leaders.

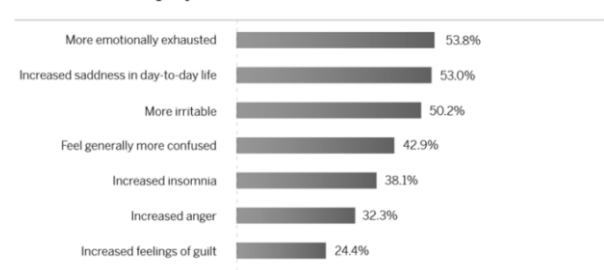
It is also reported that suicides rates over the country has increased rapidly during the lockdown. People started consulting psychiatrist for online sessions. The online doctor consultation platform Lybrate reported 110 percent rise in patients mostly consulting for mental health conditions. The forum also recorded that there was a jump of 150 percent in online consultations from women when compared to 85 percent growth in the males. The data was gathered between the period of March 1, 2020, and May 25, 2020. The queries received were mainly related to problems regarding hopelessness, isolation, being unproductive, uncertainty, there were also queries regarding job losses and fear of resuming offices.

Because of the volatility of the markets due to the pandemic many investors have sweaty nightmares. The employers though have organized counselling sessions,

many a times the call do not go through. Though support systems are organized but their functionality at the highest level is still questioned. The employees are reluctant to disclose about their problems to some extent. Though it will be unfair to say that not a single company is stepping up to help their employees. But discussing about a colleagues anxiety attacks during a coffee break is till common in the workplaces or ousting a candidate from a particular project due to his mental health issues. The day till which this sort of mindset exists we cannot say that India has progressed in dealing with mental health issues.

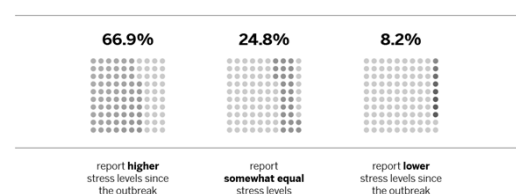
The mental health symptoms and stress as experienced by employees in a study conducted by Qualtrics are given in the charts below:

**Mental health symptoms since COVID-19 outbreak**



Source: <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health/>

**Level of stress since the coronavirus outbreak**



Source: <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health/>

#### The way ahead

The issue of mental health in the country should be discussed with open minds rather than treating it as a taboo. Few organizations have come forward and treated this problem with importance, instances maybe given about TCS an IT giant of the country who have set up TCS Cares which provides 24 x7 counselling to the employees as well as their family members. Apart from setting up TCS cares, the company also deals with mental health problems with empathy and keeps the records of its employees confidential. During the pandemic, the company is also providing mental health insurance covers to its employees.

Another IT firm Infosys has set up counselling plans for its employees, it set up an initiative called Samaritans which provide peer to peer counselling. TATA steel also has a mental health initiative called Umang which provide confidential service to its employees.

Siemens Healthineers India organised a three-day meditation programme for employees during the World Health Day under where employees were guided with a mix of theory and practice by an expert. GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare launched 'desktop yoga' which is a platform for live yoga sessions for its employees.

Many companies have also started employee outreach programmes so that they can personally connect with their employees. Example may be given about ITC hotels where every HR manager is reaching out to a minimum of 10 employees everyday in order to enquire about their health and safety

Wipro's 'Mitr' initiative, provides trained counsellors to employees in times of distress.

Similarly, Microsoft, P&G and Deloitte have also provided professional assistance for their manpower.

#### Is this enough?

According to industry experts it is only a few large firms that have organised systems to offer immediate assistance to the employees. For others such arrangements are not possible because the pandemic and the economic uncertainty associated with it has led to many companies shift their goals to optimization of cost and cutting down on resources.

The corporate houses in India are still at a nascent stage in terms of handling issues of mental health. Also for most of the companies it is not the number one priority currently because of the pandemic. Early detection of issues related to mental health help the affected to lead normal lives with no impact on productivity. But very often the employers first reaction to employees disclosing

their condition is to ask them to go on leave. The industry experts view that the rise in the number of suicides over the last six months would be a warning call to companies in India to get seriously consider the issue of mental health.

Most of the companies are arranging counselling services for their employees. These sudden spike in seeking counselling services is predominantly because of the absence of Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) in many companies. Such programmes can help corporations and their employees with a lot of issues, including mental health services and also assist in personal and family issues. The businesses in India are keen on developing a holistic approach in order to ensure a good environment for their most valuable asset.

India companies can take into account models of other countries for developing a sustainable work culture. As already explained Indian offices have one of the longest working hours. They can take a cue from their counterparts in other countries. For instance, many countries like Germany, New Zealand, Netherlands, Denmark have introduced a 4-day work week. The main focus of creating a shorter week is to sustain healthier and productive workforce. With the introduction of short weeks the productivity of people should increase. Employees are free to reassess their working style without the pressure to last the socially mandated nine-to-five, Monday to Friday. The extra day can be utilized in spending time with family and friends or investing in hobbies which will lower stress levels and increase satisfaction and productivity. Several corporates are improving their policies for better employee engagement, as retaining old talent is more cost-effective than hiring new ones.

India must also have laws like other countries where discharging an employee on account of his or her mental health should be made a criminal offence. The stigma attached to mental illnesses should also be done with. It should be understood that taking jibes at a person with mental issues can cost his or her life. Companies can make use of artificial intelligence while dealing with mental health. They should also maintain anonymity and confidentiality if a person is not willing to divulge his or her details.

In the end, corporate leaders should remember that result-oriented performances can only be achieved by giving free rein to brilliant minds who are shackled by their mental fears from giving the finest performances. The real creators of ideas may just need a touch of empathy and understanding to convert themselves from the most ridiculed minds to the valued contributors to organizations core competencies. As Aristotle said, "No great mind has ever existed without a touch of madness."

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